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## *Race-Related Differences in Self-Reported and Validated Turnout in 1984*

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Black Americans are less likely to participate in politics than white Americans are, but many students of political participation have argued that these differences result solely from racial differences in socioeconomic status. We questioned these conclusions by analyzing vote validation studies in which local registration and voting records were used to measure electoral participation. We also suggested that racial differences in turnout might be decreasing, and that controls for socioeconomic status and region might eliminate or reverse racial differences in future elections, even if participation were measured with the validated data. The 1984 SRC-CPS vote validation study is used to update our findings. Our expectations about the decline of racial differences were not fulfilled. Rather, the 1984 results are essentially similar to those we reported earlier: Racial differences in turnout are larger when the validated vote is used to measure electoral participation, and differences remain even after controls for region and level of education are introduced.

**B**lack Americans are less likely to participate in politics than white Americans are, but many students of political participation have argued that these differences result solely from the low socioeconomic status of blacks. In a recent article (Abramson and Claggett, 1984) we called this conclusion into question. Examining reported turnout among blacks and whites in 1964, 1976, 1978, and 1980, we found that racial differences in turnout were eliminated or reversed in all three presidential years when controls for region and level of education were introduced and that racial differences were reduced substantially in the 1978 midterm

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election. But racial differences in turnout persisted despite these controls when participation was measured by a vote validation measure derived from local registration and voting records. Our basic conclusion was that blacks were less likely to vote than comparably situated whites.

Given the relatively weak relationship between race and validated turnout in 1980, the increased reported turnout among blacks in the 1982 midterm election, and the mobilization of blacks by Jesse Jackson's presidential candidacy during the 1984 primary campaign, we suggested that racial differences might be reduced further in the 1984 general election (see Abramson and Claggett, 1984, p. 735). If the zero-order difference were reduced sufficiently, controls for socioeconomic status and region might eliminate or even reverse race-related differences in electoral participation, even if turnout were measured by the validated vote.

The Current Population Survey conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, in fact, revealed that race differences in reported turnout were reduced in 1984. This survey showed reported turnout to be 61.4 percent among whites and 55.8 percent among blacks. Although blacks were still less likely to report voting than whites, the 5.6 percentage point difference in reported turnout was lower than that in any of the ten previous elections studied by the U.S. Bureau of the Census (see U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1985, p. 1). The 1984 SRC survey, on the other hand, found no decline in racial differences in reported turnout. Seventy-five percent of the whites said they voted, while 66 percent of the blacks reported voting—rounding to a 10 percentage point difference. This difference is marginally larger than comparable differences in 1976 and 1980.

Ordinarily, we would place greater reliance on the Census surveys than on the election surveys conducted by the University of Michigan Survey Research Center. The Census surveys report results for over 100,000 whites and for about 13,000 blacks, while the typical SRC election survey contains far fewer cases. Furthermore, the Census surveys' estimates of national turnout are consistently closer to actual turnout results (derived by dividing the total number of votes cast for president by the total voting-age population) than estimates derived from the SRC data. For example, in 1984 actual turnout was 53.3 percent (see Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde, 1986, ch. 4) compared to the Census survey estimate of 59.9 percent. The 1984 SRC survey reveals reported turnout to be 74 percent. The SRC result is 21 percentage points higher than the actual turnout among the total voting-age population, and about 19 points higher than turnout for the voting-age citizen population.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> We must compare these surveys with different real-world populations, since the Census surveys are based upon the noninstitutionalized voting-age population, while the SRC-

Despite this substantial overestimate of turnout, the 1984 SRC survey has one major asset: it includes a vote validation study in which local registration and voting records were used to ascertain whether or not respondents were registered and whether or not they voted. The turnout based upon these official records is 68 percent, still substantially higher than the actual turnout, and more out of line with actual turnout than any of the four previous vote validation studies. But while overall turnout is far higher than actual turnout, the vote validation study does allow us to examine differential voting overreports between the races and to examine turnout differences between blacks and whites with a potential source of error removed.

Like all previous vote validation studies, the 1984 study found that blacks were more likely to overreport voting than whites.<sup>2</sup> Among the 1180 whites who said they voted in 1984, only 6 percent were classified as nonvoters by the vote validation study; among the 126 blacks who said they voted, 18 percent were classified as validated nonvoters. As Anderson and Silver (1986) point out, the percentage of voters who falsely claim to have voted may be affected by the marginal distribution of voters and nonvoters. Other things being equal, overreporting will be higher among low turnout groups. Although we recognized this in our article (see Abramson and Claggett, 1984, note 2), we did not give sufficient consideration to this point. But in 1984, black overreporting clearly persists even when we examine the "population at risk" of overreporting—respondents who have been classified as validated nonvoters. Among the 473 whites who were validated nonvoters, only 14 percent said that they voted; among the 95 blacks who were validated nonvoters, 24 percent said that they voted.

At least some respondents who are classified as validated nonvoters are actually voters. The main source of error arises when the SRC field staff fails to find the registration record of an actual voter. If these failures systematically occur more among blacks than among whites, the tendency of blacks to overreport voting would be a methodological artifact of the validation procedures. We argued, however, that it is unlikely that

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CPS surveys are based upon the noninstitutionalized politically eligible voting-age population. According to Walter Dean Burnham, turnout among the voting-age politically eligible population in 1984 was 55.2 percent. (Based upon a personal communication to Abramson, September 9, 1985.)

<sup>2</sup> Our analysis is based upon ICPSR study 8298, which released the vote validation study for the 1984 SRC-CPS national election survey. We used variable 1133, which provides a summary measure of the vote validation results for respondents who were interviewed in both the pre- and post-election surveys. Respondents coded 1 were classified as validated voters, those coded 3 and 5 were classified as validated nonvoters. All other values were classified as not ascertained.

there was enough systematic error to account for racial differences in voting overreports (Abramson and Claggett, 1984, p. 722).

The SRC changed its vote validation procedures in three major ways for the 1984 study. As anyone who looks at the ICPSR codebook will see, respondents who said they did not vote and who also said they were not registered to vote were automatically classified as validated nonvoters. This change was made to reduce costs, since previous studies had found that the vast majority of these respondents were nonvoters.

Two other changes are not described in the ICPSR codebook.<sup>3</sup> First, the SRC conducted extensive interviews with the administrators responsible for maintaining registration records in order to learn as much as possible about the best way to locate individual records. Second, about 90 percent of the validation checks were conducted by highly trained field supervisors, whereas in the four previous validation studies these checks were conducted by the interviewers. These later steps were designed to reduce error as much as possible by assuring that the number of true voters inadvertently classified as nonvoters would be reduced.

It appears that the SRC did find a larger percentage of registration records, for the overall level of “overreporting” was down from the four previous vote validation efforts, and, as a result, overall levels of validated turnout rose substantially in 1984, even though actual turnout rose by only about one percentage point.<sup>4</sup> It is unlikely these differences could result from sampling error, and it seems highly implausible that they could result from a sudden surge in honesty among the electorate. Moreover, it seems unlikely that the validation procedures were improved more in areas populated by whites than in areas populated by blacks. Therefore, we still think it is implausible that racial differences in overreporting result from a systematic tendency of the vote validation procedures to underestimate black turnout. If anything, improving those procedures led to a greater racial difference in overreporting than was found in the four earlier validation studies.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Information in this paragraph is based upon an extensive discussion with Santa Traugott who was responsible for administering the 1984 vote validation study.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, reported turnout was even more out of line with the actual result than validated turnout was. But the relative level of reported turnout to actual turnout did not change much compared with the last three presidential elections.

<sup>5</sup> In addition to changes in the vote validation procedures, the SRC made a major change in the way the post-election interview was conducted. Although all the pre-election interviews were conducted in person, half the post-election interviews were conducted by telephone. We explored the possibility that this change might have contributed to racial differences in overreporting. For example, respondents might be more likely to admit that they did not vote in a telephone interview, and, given that blacks tend to be poorer than whites, blacks might be less likely to be interviewed by telephone. Neither of these

The tendency for blacks to overreport voting leads to one clear result: race differences in turnout are substantially greater when the vote validation study is used to measure electoral participation. The 10 percentage point difference in reported turnout in 1984 grows to an 18 percentage point difference in validated turnout. The gap between the races is substantially greater than the 10 point difference in validated turnout observed in 1980. The increased gap in racial differences may result from changes in the vote validation procedures. If so, the earlier validation studies may have underestimated the actual turnout gap between white and black Americans.

As in our earlier analyses, we attempted to determine the extent to which racial differences would be reduced by controlling for the fact that blacks were more likely to live in the South and have lower levels of formal education. Table 1 of this note updates the results for tables 1 and 2 of our original article by presenting the 1984 results. The first two rows of table 1 present reported turnout by race, region, and level of education, while the bottom two rows present our results when the vote validation study is used to measure electoral participation. A relationship between turnout and region appears only for whites. Southern whites were 8 percentage points less likely to report voting than whites outside the South, while southern blacks were only a single percentage point less likely to report voting than nonsouthern blacks were. Likewise, southern whites were 14 percentage points less likely to vote than whites outside the South when the vote validation variable was used, while southern blacks were still only a percentage point less likely to vote than nonsouthern blacks. On the other hand, as our table shows, level of education was positively related to turnout among both whites and blacks in both regions and with both measures of electoral participation. However, the relationship between electoral participation and level of education was fairly weak among blacks outside the South.

As with our earlier analyses, we employ two different methods to determine the extent to which controls for region and level of education reduce the zero-order difference between race and turnout. Table 2 updates tables 3 and 4 of our original article by showing the effects of an algebraic standardization procedure in reducing these differences. Table 3 updates results from tables 5 and 6 of our original article by showing the effects of these controls in reducing racial differences when categorical regression equations are used to estimate their impact. We present the results of four equations. Equation 1 presents the zero-order

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relationships obtained. There was virtually no difference in overreporting between respondents who were interviewed by telephone and those who were interviewed in person. Moreover, blacks and whites were equally likely to be interviewed by telephone.

TABLE 1  
PERCENTAGE WHO SAID THEY VOTED AND PERCENTAGE WHO VOTED ACCORDING TO  
VOTE VALIDATION STUDY, BY RACE, REGION, AND LEVEL OF EDUCATION: 1984

METHOD OF MEASUREMENT	RACE	SOUTH					TOTAL
		8 GRADES OR LESS	SOME HIGH SCHOOL	HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE	SOME COLLEGE	COLLEGE GRADUATE	
Respondents' Reports	White	62 (40)	48 (54)	66 (115)	74 (69)	89 (61)	75.2 (1711)
	Black	54 (24)	63 (27)	56 ( 39)	81 (16)	100 (10)	
	White	53 (36)	42 (50)	54 ( 95)	59 (59)	88 (51)	
	Black	46 (24)	43 (23)	44 ( 34)	67 (15)	[ 8] ( 8)	
METHOD OF MEASUREMENT	RACE	OUTSIDE THE SOUTH					TOTAL
		8 GRADES OR LESS	SOME HIGH SCHOOL	HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE	SOME COLLEGE	COLLEGE GRADUATE	
Respondents' Reports	White	56 (98)	60 (138)	72 (508)	85 (366)	91 (262)	65.3 (213)
	Black	[4] ( 6)	65 ( 17)	65 ( 34)	65 ( 31)	[7] ( 9)	
Vote Validation Study	White	52 (92)	57 (134)	68 (475)	80 (339)	89 (250)	70.2 (1581)
	Black	[3] ( 6)	53 ( 17)	45 (31)	57 (30)	[5] ( 8)	
							52.0 (196)

Source: Surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center and the Center for Political Studies of the University of Michigan.

Note: Numbers in parentheses are totals upon which percentages are based. Numbers in brackets are the number who said they voted (or the number classified as voting) when the total *N* is less than 10.

TABLE 2  
ACTUAL AND STANDARDIZED DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WHITE AND BLACK TURNOUT AS MEASURED BY  
RESPONDENTS' REPORTS AND BY THE VOTE VALIDATION STUDY: 1984

METHOD OF MEASUREMENT	EQUATION NUMBER	CONTROLS INTRODUCED FOR FOLLOWING VARIABLE(S)	WHITE TURNOUT (%)	BLACK TURNOUT (%)	DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WHITE TURNOUT AND BLACK TURNOUT <sup>a</sup>	PERCENTAGE OF RACIAL DIFFERENCES ACCOUNTED FOR BY STANDARDIZATION PROCEDURES
Respondents' Reports	(1)	None	75.2	65.3	9.9	—
	(2)	Region	—	65.7	9.5	4
	(3)	Level of Education	—	68.4	6.8	31
	(4)	Region and Level of Education	—	68.1	7.1	28
Vote Validation Study	(1)	None	70.2	52.0	18.2	—
	(2)	Region	—	52.1	18.1	1
	(3)	Level of Education	—	56.0	14.2	22
	(4)	Region and Level of Education	—	53.8	16.4	10

Source: Surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center and the Center for Political Studies of the University of Michigan.

Note: For the numbers upon which these estimates are based, see table 1.

<sup>a</sup> White turnout minus black turnout.



difference between white turnout and black turnout, equation 2 presents the results with region introduced as a control, equation 3 presents the results controlling for level of education, while equation 4 presents the results controlling simultaneously for both region and level of education.

Turning to our algebraic standardization results, we see that for reported turnout standardizing for region has little effect upon race-related differences, while standardizing for education eliminates three-tenths of the difference between black and white turnout. Combined controls for region and level of education actually reduce marginally less of the difference than controls for level of education alone. These results differ from those for the three previous presidential election surveys in which combined controls eliminated or reversed racial differences. However, as in previous years, controls are less effective in reducing zero-order differences in validated turnout. Controls for region have a negligible effect, while controls for level of education reduce only one-fifth of the difference between black turnout and white turnout. Given the weak relationship between level of education and validated turnout among nonsouthern blacks, combined controls for region and level of education reduce only one-tenth of the zero-order difference in turnout.

While these results differ from previous analyses, we are led to the same basic conclusion: blacks are less likely to vote than whites and these differences do not result from regional differences or from their lower socioeconomic status.

Our alternative method, which uses categorical regression equations to test for the effects of these controls, yields roughly similar results. For both reported vote and validated vote the imposition of controls for region and education, separately and jointly, fails to eliminate or reverse the racial differences in turnout. Furthermore, these controls are less effective in reducing the zero-order difference in validated turnout. However, unlike the standardization results, controls for education, and especially joint controls for level of education and region, substantially reduce the zero-order racial difference in reported turnout, actually reducing this difference below statistical significance. These different results are probably due to rather severe interaction effects in 1984 among race, region, and level of education. These interaction effects are captured by the standardization procedure, since it uses the actual turnout figures for blacks and the marginal distribution of whites among the regional and educational subsets to calculate standardized turnout among blacks. The categorical regressions include only main effects. But the essential findings of the two procedures are the same. When the validated turnout measure is employed, there are substantial racial differences in turnout, and these differences persist despite controls.



TABLE 3  
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WHITE AND BLACK TURNOUT AS MEASURED BY RESPONDENTS' REPORTS AND BY THE VOTE VALIDATION STUDY AS ESTIMATED BY CATEGORICAL REGRESSION EQUATIONS (ZERO-ORDER DIFFERENCES AND DIFFERENCES WITH CONTROLS): 1984

METHOD OF MEASUREMENT	EQUATION NUMBER	CONTROLS INTRODUCED FOR FOLLOWING VARIABLE(S)	DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WHITE TURNOUT AND BLACK TURNOUT <sup>a</sup>	PERCENTAGE OF RACIAL DIFFERENCES ACCOUNTED FOR BY CONTROLS
Repondents' Reports	(1)	None	.100**	—
	(2)	Region	.076**	24
	(3)	Level of Education	.059	41
	(4)	Region and Level of Education	.025	75
Vote Validation Study	(1)	None	.183**	—
	(2)	Region	.142**	22
	(3)	Level of Education	.137**	25
	(4)	Region and Level of Education	.086*	53

Source: Surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center and the Center for Political Studies of the University of Michigan.  
Note: Variables scored as follows: Race, -1=black, 1=white; Region, -1=outside the South, 1=South. Level of Education was treated as a series of four dummy variables with each of the four lower levels of education compared with college graduates. For the numbers upon which these estimates are based, see table 1. For the two instances where we had empty cells (resulting from all respondents reporting that they voted and from all respondents being classified as validated voters), .5 cases were added.  
a. White turnout minus black turnout. This difference is derived by doubling the size of the estimated regression coefficient since with our dummy variable procedures this coefficient is equal to half the distance between white and black turnout.  
\*Significant at .05 (Based on X<sup>2</sup>s).  
\*\*Significant at .01 (Based on X<sup>2</sup>s).

The categorical regression results are similar to our earlier findings in one basic respect. If one relied upon reported turnout to measure racial differences, one would conclude that controls for region and level of education substantially reduced racial differences in turnout. The conventional wisdom that racial differences in political participation resulted solely from the low socioeconomic status of blacks might appear to be supported. But when the validated turnout measure is used, blacks are significantly less likely to vote than comparably situated whites.

Social scientists are usually pleased when new data confirm their earlier results. In this case, we are not. We expected, and hoped, that racial differences in turnout would be reduced. The 1984 vote validation study suggests that they increased. However, we think it is likely that this increase results from the changed procedures used to check local registration and voting records. Clearly, overall levels of turnout for the 1984 survey respondents were more out of line with actual turnout results than were previous vote validation efforts. These results impede comparisons across time, especially since they are not consistent with the actual turnout trend. We know, for example, that there could not have been the 7 percentage point surge in white turnout between 1980 and 1984 registered by the SRC vote validation studies. Whites, after all, make up 86 percent of the electorate, and actual turnout increased by only about a single percentage point. At the same time, neither reported nor validated turnout rose among blacks. The near doubling of the race difference in validated turnout between 1980 and 1984 is hard to accept when the much larger Census surveys show that racial differences in reported turnout declined.

The 1984 validation study, especially in conjunction with the four previous vote validation studies, strongly suggests that relative levels of black turnout are inflated when analysts rely solely upon the respondents' self-reports. The 1984 validation study suggests that reported black turnout should be discounted about 20 percent while reported white turnout should be discounted some 7 percent. Obviously, a correction rate derived from the SRC vote validation studies cannot be applied categorically to other surveys. For example, the Census surveys clearly sample the lower social strata more effectively than the SRC surveys do, and analyses of voting overreports among validated nonvoters show that better educated nonvoters are *more* likely to falsely report voting than nonvoters with lower levels of education. (See Silver, Anderson, and Abramson, 1986.) But it seems quite likely that racial differences in *reported* turnout, including the Census surveys, may understate *actual* racial differences in turnout.

These findings raise broader questions. Why are blacks more likely to overreport voting than whites? Can steps be taken to reduce these

racial differences in voting overreports? And, far more importantly, why do disadvantaged Americans prove so difficult to bring to the polls, even when massive mobilization campaigns attempt to get out their vote? We cannot provide answers here. But our results suggest that the tendency of blacks to vote less than whites was not overcome in 1984 and that blacks were less likely to vote than similarly situated whites. They also suggest that studies of turnout based upon surveys should make extensive efforts to use voting records to validate whether or not respondents actually voted.

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